

The Quest for Quality: A Practical Guide for Improving Programs in Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

By Sheri L. Berg

Surrounded by Surveys

Everywhere we go these days we are bombarded with surveys from businesses asking “How are we doing?” Fast food restaurants have survey forms on their tables. We get receipts asking about the service. Hotels lay a survey on our beds wanting to know how clean and well stocked our room was. Stores give you a code and an incentive to fill out a survey after you leave. After a stay in the hospital, along with the bill, you are sent a survey asking about the services you received while under their care. Our phone calls with customer service representatives are monitored in order to assure quality. We even see a survey question on the back of semi-trucks asking “How’s my driving?”

Sounds like everyone is doing surveys asking about the quality of their services, doesn’t it? However this has generally not been the case in the developmental/intellectual disabilities field. We don’t have a huge track record in this area compared to some other fields. As providers we have traditionally relied upon state surveyors to tell us how we are doing. If we were citation free, we were proud and probably even relaxed a bit until the next survey cycle came around.

A Different Perspective on Quality

The days of assessing quality by having no deficiencies/citations, complying with regulations or meeting a minimal set of standards are over. Even having a surveyor who only reviews records and simply glances at a person receiving services is a thing of the past.

Quality as viewed by the person served goes beyond this traditional view of quality. It is determined on an individual level and is defined differently by each person. It is about desired outcomes that are being achieved.

Primary and other Stakeholders

When assessing the quality of services and supports we provide, there are various stakeholders to consider. The primary stakeholder is always the person served. Other stakeholders include parents, families, surveyors, accrediting bodies, management, front line employees, donors, communities we operate in, etc. And let’s face it, depending on what perspective you are coming from, you could have different viewpoints on just what quality is. All stakeholders need to be considered when looking at the overall quality of services and supports we provide to help ensure we are taking a comprehensive approach. The one stakeholder who has all too often been neglected in our field when assessing quality is the person served.

Commitment to Quality from the Get Go

First and foremost organizations need to make a commitment to quality and imbed that commitment into all policies, procedures and practices. There are many factors that influence the quality of support programs and services. A key factor is the leadership in any organization. Status quo should never be the norm or expectation. Basically, we are never there; there is always another level to take services and supports to. Some key questions to consider, which can have a huge impact on quality, include:

- What are the mission, vision, and core values of your organization?
- Do they indicate a commitment to quality?
- Does the culture support those values?
- Is there a mindset of continuous learning throughout the organization?
- Do all employees have an understanding of how the work they do supports the quality efforts of the organization?
- Does frontline staff feel they are part of the team?
- Do their ideas/opinions get solicited and encouraged on how to improve the services and supports to people?
- Are there advocacy efforts in support of quality at the individual level, program level and organizational level? How so?
- How are these communicated?

Other Factors that Influence Quality

As a Qualified Mental Retardation Professional (QMRP), like anyone else in a leadership position, the way you talk about the people you support often mirrors your behavior, actions and interactions. In this role it is essential that your behavior depicts respect for others, and that all people are treated with dignity and respect. Do you walk by someone and simply ignore them or pretend they are not there? Do you include everyone in the conversation or just talk at or about someone as if they were not there?

It helps to operate from a common set of core values. It is a good idea to talk with staff about the basic values your organization operates from. When you do this, it often gets people thinking in a new light about what they are doing, and how they are doing it. When you gain a consensus on the values you are going to adhere to in your team and stick to them, you are taking one more step towards improving quality of services. As our CEO Dr. John Bauer said recently, “we need to be passionate about what we do, have a sense of being called to what we do, and strive to create a working environment that supports our mission.”

Words and Actions

Let’s take a moment to talk about terminology. You need to be cognizant of how you talk to and about people receiving services. When you use terms such as “high functioning” or “low functioning” or “my residents,” you are referring to people as things or objects as if you own them. Certainly this is not very flattering or how you or I would

like to be referred to. When you walk past someone, do you say hello and acknowledge them in some way? Do you take a moment to have some dialogue or are you always “too busy” and just hurry by without acknowledging the person? Giving time to someone, seeking their opinion and listening carefully to what the person and their behavior is communicating, are great ways to show you care. This also shows a commitment to the importance of relationships, and is a great way to role model appropriate behavior. All these actions will help support quality efforts.

Data Driven Decision Making

Data driven decision making should be the norm. Where are you now? It is important to have baseline data to be able to develop some “stretch goals”. Goals need to be developed with the mindset that they can be achieved but will require some effort and work. Many people have heard about SMART goals. Goals should be Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic, and indicate the Timeframe you hope to achieve them. Once goals are developed, do not forget about them. They need to be monitored on a regular basis. This allows for troubleshooting and adjusting if you get off track. Before, after, and ongoing data taking allows providers to note and track trends in order to ensure services are actually improving and meeting the outcomes of people.

It’s all about Relationships

A quality focus also means building relationships with those we serve, our colleagues, partnering with similar organizations, the community, and others who may share a common interest or stake in improving services and ultimately the lives of people. We are stronger together than apart. By collaborating with others who have a shared commitment to improving quality of services, and by having honest open dialogue, we can learn from others’ mistakes, share and discover best practices, and help stimulate creativity and innovation.

Tools you can Use

There are numerous examples of quality indicator surveys on the World Wide Web. You can Google “Personal Outcome Measures (Council on Quality and Leadership)” to learn more about locating a survey tool for finding out what is important to people. You can also Google “quality measures” and find a boatload of information to start giving you an idea of other quality indicators that could be used. The important thing is to determine what you want to find out, and what might be the best tool/questionnaire to get you the information. If at first you don’t succeed, don’t worry about it. Keep striving to improve your measuring tools and remember “you are never there.” Once you reach your goal(s), it’s time to strive for the next level!

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